



United States Department of Agriculture

MISSISSIPPI

NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE

ANNUAL REPORT

 FY 2020

Kurt Readus, State Conservationist



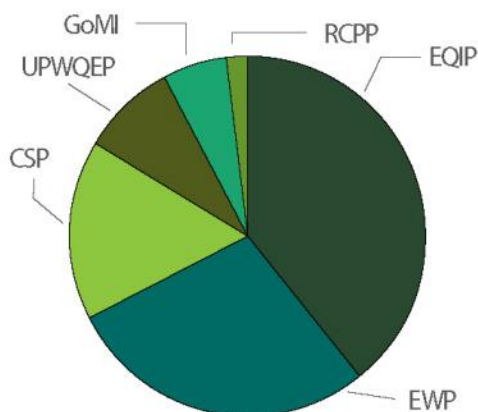


At-a-Glance

FY
20

Mississippi NRCS • January 2021 • State Conservationist Kurt Readus • kurt.readus@usda.gov

FY20 TOTAL PROGRAM ACCOMPLISHMENTS



UPWQEP	\$204 k	—	6 contracts
CSP	\$19.2 M	122,185 AC	158 contracts
EQIP	\$46.8 M	221,660 AC	1,933 contracts
RCPP	\$1.9 k	—	1 contracts
EWP	\$33.5 M	—	175 contracts
GoMI	\$300 K	—	10 contracts
TOTAL	\$110.4 M	348,784 AC	1,762 contracts

Note: This graphic is based on contract obligations to the right of chart.

EQIP—Environmental Quality Incentives Program

SUB ACCOUNT	CONTRACTS	ACRES	OBLIGATIONS
Beginning Farmer/ Rancher	84	6,954	\$2,301,827.11
Limited Resource	7	495.30	\$129,715.36
Locally Led	759	57,105.60	\$16,160,037.53
MRBI	63	2,218.70	\$6,488,909.09
NWQI	105	16,587	\$5,131,456.42
On-Farm Energy	38	778.50	\$1,436,676.24
Socially Disadvantaged	80	4,432.80	\$1,661,098.79
State	279	57,938.60	\$5,788,632.32

EQIP—Environmental Quality Incentives Program

New Contracts: 1,933 Acres: 221,660
Obligations: \$47,000,000

CSP—Conservation Stewardship Program

Contracts: 158 Acres: 122,185
Obligations: \$19,000,000

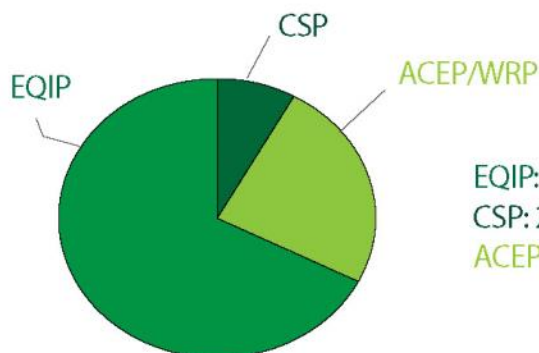
ACEP—Agricultural Conservation Easement Program

Easements: 100 Acres: 18,900
New Contracts: 12 Obligations: \$11,743,593

RCPP—Regional Conservation Partnership Program

Contracts: 1 Obligations: \$1,995

Ongoing Program Workload—Active Contracts, Easements



EQIP: 1,933 contracts
CSP: 235 contracts
ACEP/WRP: 704 easements

Mississippi

**Natural
Resources
Conservation
Service**

ms.nrcs.usda.gov

A Message From the State Conservationist Kurt Readus

“The year was different, but our dedication, hard work, and commitment to providing high-quality content remained the same,”



The Fiscal Year (FY) of 2020 began with the implementation of the 2018 Farm Bill. Due to the great work our field offices accomplished in years past, we were faced with the tremendous opportunity to make payments and load all previous Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) contracts needed to fulfil the agency's obligation to CSP contract holders. We overcame challenges and pressed forward learning the new way of business in regards to conservation assistance and program contracting. As a state we rolled up our sleeves and jumped into learning, while also implementing the long-awaited business tools Conservation Desktop (CD), Conservation Assessment and Ranking Tool (CART), as well as, the Select Agreement Tool (SAT). Although it was difficult, the staff saw us through placing thousands of plans and assessments in the contracting system. The accomplishments achieved in Mississippi would not be if it were not for the strong partnerships with Mississippi Association of Conservation Districts, local Soil Water Conservation District, MS Soil and Water Conservation Commission (MSWCC), and many others.

Much like the previous FY, the state saw its share of natural disasters in various forms. The first being straight-line winds that impacted the Mississippi Delta and parts of Central Mississippi. Followed by tornadoes that

Impacted agricultural producers through the Easter weekend, as well as multiple hurricanes impacting various portions of the state.

Lastly, the COVID 19 pandemic. I have seen innovation at its best from our staff as we faced the many challenges mentioned above. Field offices went from meeting in the comfort of office buildings to holding meetings with partners and farmers in outdoor elements. Most landowner meetings were literally held standing on opposite sides of the truck as we made site visits and conducted conservation planning activities. I mention these challenges to highlight the victories of Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) made to accomplish the goal of placing conservation on the ground for our state's outstanding agricultural producers. We left no stone unturned to complete obligations for the EQIP, CSP, and ACEP programs. Through the partnership, we were able to make significant progress in assisting many communities through our watershed programs. Whether it be a rehabilitation of a structure, or a dam that was impaired due to major storm events, we completed many tasks related to protecting life and property through this valuable program. NRCS would like to extend Special thanks to the MSWCC for its locally-led approach in meeting these community needs.

Additionally, I am extremely proud of our accomplishments in welcoming new members to our staff. Throughout FY20, we exceeded the quota of the number boots on the ground since 2012. This achievement is because of the excellent assistance we receive from the Human Resource Division. Our

point of contact, Shawna Carter, worked with our Management and Strategy staff and the many selecting officials to fill over 82 positions in FY20. We will continue to fill the vacancies we have until we meet our cap for Full Time employees. We are thankful to the Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue for allowing NRCS to fulfil the needs for officials that are desperately needed within the state. This accomplishment brings on the task and responsibility to train and build new hires' technical competency. It is the responsibility of every seasoned employee to ensure that we prepare the future of this agency to provide the excellent technical assistance needed to keep agriculture strong and viable.

***ACEP— Agricultural Conservation Easements Program**

***EQIP— Environmental Quality Incentives Program**

The Management and Strategy is responsible for outreach and partnerships, local programs, strategic support services, and policy and program analysis.



Michael Carr
*Assist State Conservationist
Management and Strategy*

The Management and Strategy staff submits the following synopsis of accomplishments for FY20.

- 23 Cooperative Agreements were completed totalling \$8,283,095.65.
- Completed 11 non-competed cooperative agreements totalling \$31,594,550.18.
- Nine Upper Pascagoula Water Quality Enhancement Project (UPWQEP) landowner agreements totalling \$281,627.00.
- Reviewed and processed 246 payments on cooperative agreements totalling \$7,624,045.61.
- 55 Gulf Coast Conservation Reserve Program (GCCRP) landowner payments totalling \$391,273.00.
- 19 UPWQEP payments Totalling \$122,978.69.
- Reviewed and funded approved AD-700s, Funds Pre-Commitments (FPCs), Funding Availability Verifications (FAVs) and other misc.

AD-700s -314 regular; 40 Easement, 17 Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP), 20 GCCRP, 9 UPWQ

FPCs -certified funds for 146 EWP, 39 Agreement FPCs, 79 Modifications

FAVs – certified funds for 12 FAVs

Integrated Acquisition System (IAS) – approved 45 Requisitions

- 135 Financial Management Modernization Initiative (FMMI) reports were queried for returned miscellaneous payments.
- Attended/coordinated and or presented at 32 virtual public outreach meetings.
- Conducted four quarterly EEO/Civil Rights Committee teleconferences.

Processed 82 Memorandum of Agreements between NRCS and the local SWCD's and the State Soil and Water Commission.

- Business Service Specialist Submitted 129 staffing recruitments.
- Tracked progress of all selections, tentative offers and onboarding of 86 staffing recruitments.
- Submitted four Pathway interns conversion packages.
- Submitted and tracked the progress of 29 promotions.
- Submitted and tracked 28 temporary promotion and not to exceed requests.
- Submitted and tracked 289 personnel actions and requests in HR Employee Care Center.
- Calculated 99 performance awards and five Quality Step Increase's amount according to Budget Guidance.
- Entered two training requests in the Conference Transparency Accountability Tracking system.
- Completed and submitted 29 retirees Lump Sum Leave/ Compensatory Time Payment requests.

• The State of Mississippi successfully reached its assigned goal for FY20 as it relates to performance measure 6.9 Conservation Applied to improve environmental quality acres for Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA). Manage the state Performance Result System:

- State goals were exceeded by 44%
 - 432,601 acres of conservation applied to improve environmental quality (CTA).



Conservation Programs

NRCS's natural resources conservation programs help people reduce soil erosion, enhance water supplies, improve water quality, increase wildlife habitat, and reduce damages caused by floods and other natural disasters.



Clarence Finley
Assist State Conservationist
Programs

ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY INCENTIVES PROGRAM (EQIP) - FY20

EQIP provides technical and financial assistance to farmers and landowners to address their natural resource concerns. Funds are distributed at the county level and towards state-wide resource concerns. In 2020, Mississippi had six state-wide resource concerns. Mississippi received approximately \$47 million in EQIP funds in 2020. The state-wide and county-level application sign-up resulted in 10,115 applications with requests of more than \$145 million. These applications resulted in 1,933 contracts obligated on 221,660 acres. In conjunction with the Mississippi Soil and Water Commission (MSWC), State leadership and the Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) have completed five readiness phase watershed requests: North Tippah, Upper Bayou, Middle Bayou, Carmichael Creek, Coon Creek.

REGIONAL CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM (RCPP) - FY20

RCPP promotes coordination between NRCS and its partners to deliver conservation assistance to producers and landowners. NRCS assists producers through partnership agreements and program contracts or easement agreements.

The second RCPP project with the Mississippi Urban Forest Council is well underway. During FY20, Mississippi was able to obligate one contract in the amount of \$1,995.00. This pollinator habitat project will address multiple issues concerning pollination and cover crops. We will guide diverse audiences on how to improve the health of pollinators and impact their health. All best management practices will be demonstrated in model pollinator sites in 12 urban and rural communities and 12 specialty crop farmers in or around these communities. Through the diversity of site locations (city and farms), we will track certain practices' success and these practices' impacts.

CONSERVATION STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM (CSP)

CSP helps agricultural producers maintain and improve their existing conservation systems and adopt additional conservation activities to address priority resource concerns. Participants earn CSP payments for conservation performance — the higher the performance, the higher the payment. CSP provides two types of payments through five-year contracts: annual payments for installing new conservation activities and maintaining existing practices and supplemental payments for adopting a resource-conserving crop rotation. Producers may be able to renew a contract if they have successfully fulfilled the initial contract and agree to achieve additional conservation objectives.

Payments are applied following practice implementation after October first of each fiscal year for contract activities installed and maintained in the previous year. Producers must have effective control of the land for the term of the proposed contract. Contracts include all eligible land in the agricultural operation. Official Web Soil Survey Available - Soil Science Annual Data Now Refreshed in July 1st, 2020 We anticipate the next Web Soil Survey Refresh date will be October 1, 2021.

FY20 was a tremendous year in Programs! Mississippi excelled in obligating contract during challenging times.

THE GULF OF MEXICO INITIATIVE (GoMI)

GoMI works hand-in-hand with other NRCS landscape-level conservation efforts. Through the GoMI, NRCS uses conservation programs and practices to provide technical and financial support to help producers, government agencies, and other groups put conservation on the ground in the Gulf region. NRCS leverages public and private conservation investments through an extensive network of existing partnerships by coordinating with soil and water conservation districts, state and federal agencies, and non-profit groups; many NRCS investments are matched two- or three-fold. Partners include federal and state agencies on the Natural Resources Damage Assessment Trustee

Council and the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, which play pivotal roles in aiding Gulf recovery and broadening opportunities for voluntary private lands conservation. During FY20, Mississippi obligated 10 contracts

UPPER PASCAGOULA WATER QUALITY ENHANCEMENT PROJECT (UPWQEP) - FY20

NRCS worked with other partners (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ)) to develop and implement conservation plans to reduce nutrient and sediment contributions in watersheds located in the central Mississippi region. Six contracts have been funded with a total amount of \$284,037.

EMERGENCY WATERSHED PROTECTION PROGRAM (EWPP) - FY20

NRCS utilizes EWP in coordination with a State sponsor to help people and conserve natural resources by relieving imminent hazards to life and property caused by floods, fires, windstorms, and other natural occurrences. EWP is an emergency recovery program.

During FY20, state and area project engineers assisted sponsors with submitting approximately 175 Disaster Survey Reports (DSRs), requesting over \$33.5 million. All DSR's were funded in FY20. There was also one Exigency completed, Panther Drive, for a total of \$107,414 and a total obligation of \$380,500 on EWP Watershed Structures.



Easements



Protecting and Enhancing Our Natural Resources

NRCS offers easements programs to landowners who want to maintain or enhance their land in a way beneficial to agriculture and/or the environment. All NRCS easement programs are voluntary. We provide technical help and financial assistance, but local landowners and organizations are needed to make NRCS easement programs successful.



Jason Keenan
Assist State Conservationist

Agricultural Conservation Easements Program (ACEP)-Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE) is our most popular easement program in the state. We had more than 310 applications, and with limited funding, we were able to enroll ten easements. In addition, one 30-year easement was accepted for conversion to a permanent easement. These 11 agreements are a significant accomplishment considering the short turnaround time in a compressed funding cycle, resulting in over \$7 million in obligated funds. This requires effort from the entire Mississippi NRCS team, especially the easement team, which helped accomplish these goals. Let's take a look at the numbers below:

- 199 ACEP-WRE easement applications.
- 10 new easement agreements enrolled.
- One 30-yr-to-permanent conversion.
- Total more than 2,050 total acres and close to \$7.9 million in funds.

Included in this are Water Reserve Enhancement Program (WREP) easements enrolled in the Tri-state Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Program (WREP), obligating roughly \$1.02 million to enroll 209 acres. For WREP funds within the Batture this year, Mississippi enrolled 1009+ acres utilizing \$3.1 million.

- Enhanced restoration on WRP, NRCS utilized \$1,700,000 WRE funds on existing easements by repairing older structures, impoundments, and vegetative restoration.

- In addition to new enrollments, Mississippi NRCS was able to restore more than 2057 acres of bottomland hardwood and wetland habitat on closed easements.
- Closed 12 permanent easements totaling 2,224 acres within the fiscal year, with another six expected over the next few months.

We look forward to continued enrollments, closings, and restorations throughout Fiscal Year 2021.

For the first time in about a decade, Mississippi was able to utilize the Emergency Watershed Protection Program – Floodplain Easement funds (EWPP-FPE). More than 798 acres were enrolled in Warren county, mitigating flood damage to crops and obligating more than \$2.7M in EWPP-FPE funds.

Mississippi Land Trust and NRCS closed the second Agricultural Conservation Easement Program - Agricultural Lands Easement (ACEP-ALE). This 70-acre property located close to the Mississippi Sandhill Crane National Wildlife Refuge provides habitat for the endangered birds that frequent the site. We look forward to more ACEP-ALE enrollments in the future.

Our Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) Healthy Forest Reserve Program (HFRP) resulted in three new enrollments of forested easements. These will provide habitat for Gopher Tortoise and Black Pine Snake and help provide an undeveloped buffer around Camp Shelby Training Center.

Easements continues to be a key player in Mississippi as an NRCS longest-lasting conservation program.

Engineering

Leading Innovative Engineering Solutions to Conserve Natural Resource Conservation

The Mississippi NRCS Engineering team (ET) oversaw \$1.2 million in financial assistant dollars to construct Richland Creek Dam 2A, PL-534 projects and Ellison Creek remediation. The team assisted in planning more than \$800,000 in technical assistance for Rocky Carter Levee, South Delta, Big Sand and Greasy Watershed Rehab, Long Beach Watershed improvements, Richland Creek improvements, and Watershed Dam Assessments.

NRCS completed eight EWP designs in various municipalities in South MS and three EQIP grade control structure designs and provided Computer Aided Design (CAD) training to area technicians.

The team completed Quality Assurance Reviews (QAR) for FY20. NRCS provided engineering designs on the Catalpa Creek 319 project and the Oktibbeha County Field Office totaling \$275,000.

The purpose of the project was to reduce nutrient and sediment runoff within the watershed. 12 grade stabilization designs were provided through EQIP, four shallow water impoundments through EQIP, 10 EWP sites prepared waiting for funding provided one-on-one training to five field offices.

NRCS Engineering team served as Contracting Officer Representative (COR) on 18 Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE). There were 18 new easements and two 30-year permanent easements that resulted in approximately \$17 million in obligated funds with approximately 3,800 total acres. NRCS ET provided 174 Water Well Depth estimates to the counties throughout the state. NRCS ET requested funds for dam assessments through the National Watershed Program, where Miss., received funding for 11 dam assessments totaling \$220,000.

NRCS ET worked on Holmes County Black Creek Y-36-37 with drain/breach recommendation. Dam inspections were performed for High Hazard Dams and gathered recent inspection reports, maps, and contacting landowners. We continued studying the Miss. State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP) 2015-2025.



Olguy Louis
*State Conservationist
Engineer*



*Grade Stabilization
Structure.*



Longitudinal stone toe is another form of a windrow revetment, with the stone placed along the existing streambed rather than on top bank.



New Fans using the On-Farm Energy Initiative helps farmers and ranchers make voluntary improvements that can boost energy efficiency on the farm.

Soils

Only “living” things can have health, so viewing soil is a living ecosystem reflects a fundamental shift in the way we care for our nation’s soil



Delaney Johnson
State Soil Scientist

The simple yet powerful way
to access and use soil data.



The Soil Sciences Technical Services Technology and Natural Resources Support unit has worked to maintain a continued quality level of services to agency, customers and partners. The services and support we provide consist of review and update of tabular, spatial and related soils data. We provided technical services for soil investigations, interpretations, databases, cartographic and conservation systems support to internal and external customers. This support was provided to our FPAC Agricultural Service Center Field staffs through an integration of technical tools and conservation database systems support. This helped field staffs process conservation program applications for appropriate eligibility, ranking, approval and installation requirements of conservation practices to the land. The delivery of this information is customized and packaged by certain Geographical Information Systems (GIS) technology into products that help to calculate, display and reference into digital information and is made available to conservation partners, cooperators and other users. Through this our reporting of accomplishments:

Activity	Number
Wetland Determinations	39
Pond site assessments	59
National Resources Inventory	781
Soils Teaching (MSU/School/individual)	13
Other Technical Soil Services	8

National Resources Inventory NRI

Collected and updated information on the status, condition, and trends of land, soil, water, and related resources on the Nation’s Non-Federal lands.

Non-Federal lands include:

National High-Altitude Photography (NHAP)

NHAP photography 1980 – 1987

Leaf-off CIR 1980-1982 imagery available

Leaf-off CIR early 1986 funded and in process of contracting work

Official Web Soil Survey Available -A Soil Science Annual Data Now Refreshed in July 1st, 2020

We anticipate the next Web Soil Survey Refresh date will be October 1, 2021.

Ecological Site Descriptions (ESD)- Levels of Completion

Provisional ESDs

Completed draft site keys (soil query to group into NatureServe ecological community)

Currently we are testing site keys, soil-ecological community queries: Approved and Correlated

Farmland Protection Policy Act (FPPA)

FPPA is intended to minimize the impact federal programs have on the unnecessary and irreversible conversion of farmland to nonagricultural uses. Total acres proposed for land use conversion FY20 were 6589.8 acres.

130.8	66.6	123.0	5.3	2165.8	1.0	38.2	3000.0	1035.1	23.0							6588.8
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GIS Support

Completed Geographic Analysis and Cartographic Products on the following projects:

Yalobusha Landscape Restoration Project for USFS/NRCS collaboration.

Upper Porter Bayou

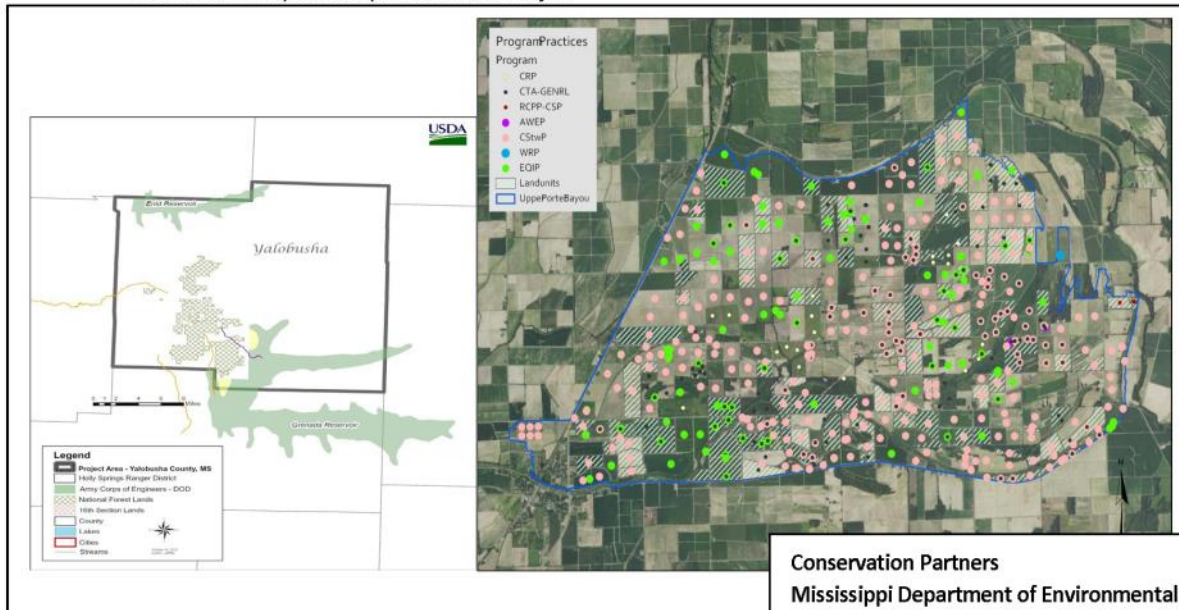
Upper Pascagoula Watershed

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IDEA Report for GCCRP Forest Service (USFS) and Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS)

Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership Proposal

Yalobusha County Landscape Restoration Project

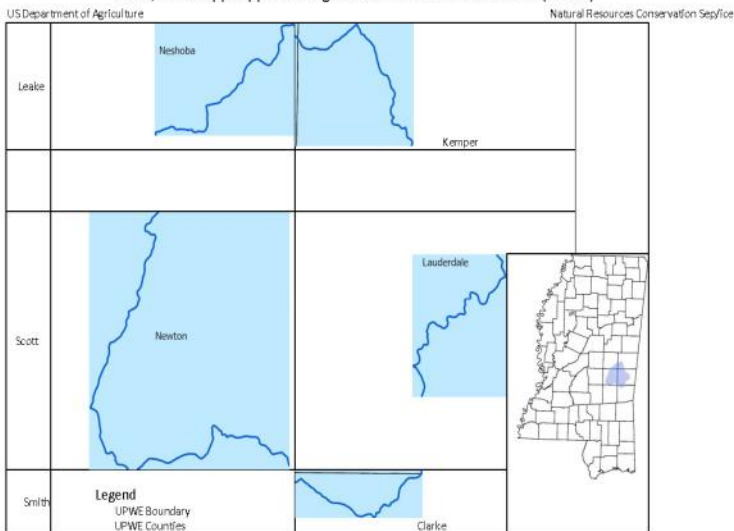


Upper Porter Bayou
080302070504

Big Sunflower Watershed 08030207

IDEA report 09/28/2020

NRCS, Mississippi Upper Pascagoula Watershed Enhancement (UPWE)



Natural Resource Support -FPAC

Conservation Partners

Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality

-Imagery and Impaired waterbodies and streams

USDA Gulf Coast Ecosystems Restoration Team – RESTORE

-Upper Pascagoula Watershed – NRDA- (National Resources Damage Assessment, GCCRP- (Gulf Coast Conservation Reserve Program) and WLWF- (Working Lands for Wildlife)

Mississippi Soil and Water Conservation Commission

-Ecological Site Descriptions-

Mississippi State University

-MWRRRI

-REACH

-TSS Liaison

Alcorn State University

-Nutrient and Water Budget Management Study

-Online Curriculum

US Geological Survey- USGS

-Data, maps and imagery

Mississippi Department of Health

Waste-Water Advisory Committee

Piney Woods Boarding School

Soil Health Enrichment and Learning Curriculum

Conservation Assessment Ranking Tool

Assessment Summary: CSP_CoePlan_best

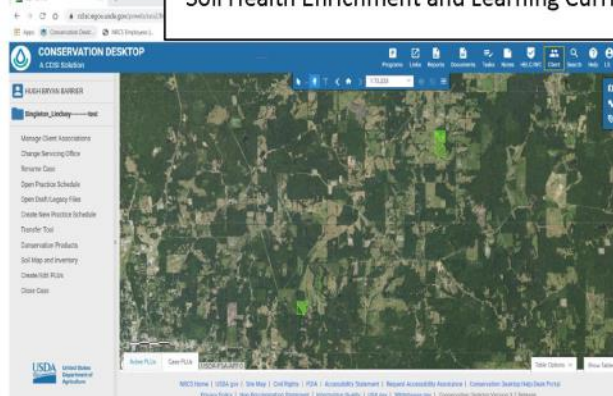
Assessment Date: 11-10-2020 Assessment Status: In Assessment Planner Name: Lindsay Grisham Client Name: HUGO EDWIN BAKER Schedule Name: CSP_CoePlan_best

Assessment Dashboard

Status for survey sections are shown below for each field unit

Assessed Plot / Land Unit	Land Unit	PLS Shifters	Acres	Resource Concerns	Resource Inventory	Guiding Practices	Planned Practices	Overall Status	Action
2578				<input type="radio"/> Not Started	<input type="radio"/> Not Started	<input type="radio"/> Not Started	<input type="radio"/> Not Started	<input type="radio"/> Not Started	Results
2475.1	Forest		29.2	<input type="radio"/> Not Started	<input type="radio"/> Not Started	<input type="radio"/> Not Started	<input type="radio"/> Not Started	<input type="radio"/> Not Started	
2475.2	Forest		12.08	<input type="radio"/> Not Started	<input type="radio"/> Not Started	<input type="radio"/> Not Started	<input type="radio"/> Not Started	<input type="radio"/> Not Started	
2487				<input type="radio"/> Not Started	<input type="radio"/> Not Started	<input type="radio"/> Not Started	<input type="radio"/> Not Started	<input type="radio"/> Not Started	

Clear Dashboard



Ecological Science



Rogerick Thompson
State Resource
Conservationist

*The Ecological Science Division (ESD)
leads the technology for USDA NRCS in
ecological, culture resource, and
environmental compliance technologies to
ensure science-based conservation for our
Nation's resources*

The Ecological Sciences team started the year off intending to create a greater level of comfort and clarity for field offices, as they were introduced to the Conservation Assessment Ranking Tool (CART). A tool used to streamline further technical and financial services provided to agriculture producers throughout the state. CART now serves as a tool that measures existing conditions and planned practices to achieve desired conservation levels. Mississippi NRCS Field offices completed over 3,200 assessments that led to contracts for the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), and Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) contributed to financial assistance.

NRCS, in conjunction with Animal and Plant Health Service, pursued additional feral swine eradication and control efforts to minimize the degradation of soil, water, and plant resources. Mississippi was approved to announce an expansion of the existing Mississippi South Delta Feral Swine Pilot Project. Round two of the pilot project expands control efforts to include Washington, Holmes, Humphreys, Claiborne, and Jefferson counties. The pilot project will give NRCS, APHIS, and the awarded partner an additional 1.9 million eligible acres to address the feral swine concern. Besides eradication and education, other contributions from the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce (MDAC), Mississippi State University (MSU), and the Mississippi Soil and Water Conservation Commission (MSWCC) will further enhance this project.

Impaired water bodies, in addition to watersheds where nutrient loads and aquifer depletion is a concern, were targeted to maximize conservation opportunities. Together MSWCC, MDEQ, and Waggoner Engineering collaborated to complete 16 watershed assessments.

Hydrological Unit Codes (HUC) 12 watershed assessments will allow impaired water bodies and contributing to the Gulf of Mexico nutrient/sediment loads to receive financial assistance in addition to general EQIP. These additional opportunities will be

available through the National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI) and Mississippi River Basin Initiative (MRBI). The Jamie L. Whitten Plant Materials Center (PMC) continues to conduct and report on and off-farm research to further equip planners and producers with cover crop species and cultivar performances. The PMC conducted a two-year evaluation of 56 commercially available varieties of cool-season cover crops to assess their adaptation and performance in the Southeast. Results were published in the Electronic Field Office Technical Guide (EFOTG) or PMC website under Plant Materials Technical Note 3, Evaluation of Cool Season Cover Crops in the Southeast Region. Based on this research, the PMC initiated a new two-year study (September 2020) evaluating cool-season grass cover crops as influenced by planting and termination date.

In partnership with area offices, field offices, and producers, cover crop demos were planted at six locations across North Mississippi (Fall 2020) with anticipation of hosting field days in 2021.

The PMC continues to plant yearly warm and cool-season cover crop demonstrations at the center and evaluate the long-term soil health study. Lastly, three unimproved areas on the farm were renovated and planted with pollinator plants to improve pollinator habitats for future research and field days.

Public Affairs

The Public Affairs Division provides communications products and services to advance NRCS mission.



Laura T. Anderson
State Public Affairs Officer

A Snapshot at FY20



The Mississippi NRCS Public Affairs (PA) Staff faced challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic that brought America and our agency to a halt. With the bulk of the work we do involving going out and meeting landowners, the staff shifted and adjusted to continue to provide quality content for employees and the entire state of Mississippi. The PA staff also provided extra hands to help in other areas of the agency. From running state-wide meetings via Microsoft Teams, to ensuring customers received all documents and paperwork in timely manner.



During the challenging times of COVID-19, Mississippians still meet the needs of conserving our natural resources by helping NRCS through our Earth Team Volunteer program. Across the state, 519 volunteers donated 5,590.25 hours.

"Volunteering is the ultimate exercise in democracy. You vote in elections once a year, but when you volunteer, you vote every day about the kind of community you want to live in". ~Author Unknown



Area 1

Alcorn, Benton, Calhoun, Carroll, Chickasaw, Clay, Desoto, Grenada, Itawamba, Lafayette, Lee, Marshall, Monroe, Montgomery, Panola, Pontotoc, Prentiss, Tate, Tippah, Tishomingo Union, Webster, Yalobusha

"FY20 could be captured in one word – CHANGES. Area 1 saw many personnel changes throughout the year. All employees adapted to learn new software and assist customers by preparing maps on Conservation Desktop and Conservation Assessments and Rankings in CART during the COVID 19 Pandemic.

Christy Robinson
Area
Conservationist

All field offices still met deadlines and targets by making changes to the normal customer service approach, fully masked in the parking lot, farm headquarters, or in the field."

This fiscal year has been the year of turnover; from personnel to software and the way we have conducted business operations for many years. The Covid-19 restrictions at Service Centers taught us to be creative in continuing the order of business. Employees have continued to work to meet the demands of the USDA Programs and meet deadlines. The introduction of Conservation Desktop (CD) and Conservation Resource Assessment Tool (CART) presented a new way to deliver services by using science and geospatial technology to evaluate each application.

There have been 67 personnel actions during this year. Some were federal, and others were contract workers or SWCD personnel changes. During the fiscal year, we saw 12 employees achieve the status of retirement. They each had left a great legacy of conservation in North Mississippi, and most had an average of 35 years of service. This left a windfall of vacancies, but we were able to arrange for several details until the vacancy announcements were filled with permanent employees. The FPAC Business Center worked aggressively on the hiring process with federal positions. Several Soil and Water Districts hired new employees, and we also had changes in the National Older Workers (ACES) staff.

FY20 USDA Farm Bill Program Summary for Area 1 (23 North MS Counties)

Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) in Area 1 covered 62 sites in 15 counties for \$8,817,445.00

- To date 18 of those agreements are completed and \$2,283,916.00 has been spent.
- The Grenada Project Engineering office assisted 8 counties on the west side of Area 1 with 28 agreements in the amount of \$3,657,869.00

Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) in Area 1 has received and processed 3,429 applications in 23 counties and obligated 466 contracts for \$7,729,622.89

Conservation Stewardship Program (CStwP) in Area 1 has received 1,267 applications and obligated 48 Classic and Renewal contracts for \$6,545,922.00

Conservation Stewardship Program – Grassland Conservation Initiative (CStwP – GCI) in Area 1 were obligated on 41 contracts for \$117,240.00

National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI)

North Tippah	\$1.5 Million	(Tippah and Benton County)
Hudson/Clear Creek	\$250,000	(Lafayette County)

Submitted nomination for the **Joint Chief's Landscape Restoration Project** for Yalobusha County in conjunction with the US Forest Service.

Employees have been involved throughout the year providing education and outreach to many groups of people, and most recently by virtual meetings or teleconference options to continue operations. I am very proud to be associated with our employees at USDA NRCS and providing services to the stewards of the land.

Fifth-Generation Farmer Continues to Add to His Family Legacy

Aaron Porter, State Public Affairs Assistant

Photos By: Laura Anderson, State Public Affairs Officer



Sledge Taylor can remember riding with his dad on his family's farm as a child, creating memories that have lasted a lifetime. It was there that the two forged a bond that will never be broken, and where Taylor formed his love for farming and agriculture. Now, as a fifth-generation farmer walking in his father's footsteps and becoming the owner of Buckeye Farms, Taylor seeks to continue the farming legacy in Panola County.

Buckeye Farms consists of a diverse crop rotation of cotton, corn, soybeans, wheat, and peanuts. Taylor farms on 4,500 acres of land, has 1,400 pasture acres and over 250 acres in hay crops.

Taylor first heard about the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) at the genesis of his farming career back in 1974 through his father's relationship with the agency. Over the years, Taylor has also formed a connection with the EQIP program and conservation practices.

"The program gives you an incentive to try something new," stated Taylor. "Whether it be cross fencing or cover crops or anything out there you're interested in doing, they can help you do it."

Cover crops have been an essential part of Buckeye Farms over the years. Providing ways to keep his soil cropping system healthy is a priority for Taylor, as cereal rye, and radishes offer multiple benefits for his land.

"A cover crop is precious as it builds organic matter on the soil; and for us, planting cover crops allows us to keep growing even in the wintertime, which is beneficial for the land," said Taylor. "The ground becomes mellow, and it doesn't crust as much, making the soil great for the new crop going in."

Buckeye Farms practices what we call "no-till farming. No-till farming is the agricultural technique for growing crops or pasture without disturbing the soil through tillage. Taylor has had so much success with no-till, that he has some fields that have not been plowed in over 20 years! Once he discovered the positive contributions no-till can bring to a farmer, it was a no-brainer; he knew he had found the key to success.

Being the owner of several thousand acres of land can be a lot, but Taylor credits a lot of his success to working with NRCS. He believes going into the field offices with the right mindset and approach can do wonders for a farmer.

"Go in with a good attitude and the approach that these are some practices you want to try," said Taylor. "Staying with the program and learning how it works is the best thing you can do; it's helped me tremendously, and I know others can benefit from it as well."



Area 2

Attala, Choctaw, Claiborne, Clarke, Copiah, Hinds, Jasper, Kemper, Lauderdale, Leake, Lowndes, Madison, Neshoba, Newton, Noxubee, Oktibbeha, Rankin, Scott, Simpson, Smith, Winston, and Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians Tribal Office

"As a new AC, I've seen already that Area 2 is an established leader in the state for its Outreach community meetings, Earth Team Volunteer Program, as well as managing the EQIP program—a total of 488 contracts with \$10,632,419 obligated on 73,087 acres during FY2020. Our team readily goes above and beyond to make sure that conservation is put on the ground, our employees are trained, and good relations with landowners are maintained. A few more highlights include:

Jamie Keith

Area Conservationist

- Obligation of over \$5,800,000.00 in EQIP financial assistance, \$107,000 CSP-GCI assistance, and \$3,200,000.00 in CSP assistance for FY 2020. There were over 100 modifications.
- The Area Agronomist has taken the lead in the Upper Pascagoula Watershed initiative and has encouraged the addition of 21 applications estimated to be worth over \$1.5 million in obligation.
- We provided the field offices with an Employee Appreciation Day to recognize efforts during a time when we were short on staff and dealing with the challenges of a new Farm Bill. J. J. Smith was responsible for this amazing day." **Jamie Keith**



Soil Conservation Technician Bill Stalcup discusses future conservation practices with dairy goat farmer Kathy Rickles standing beside her Alpine and Nubian dairy goats. Kathy is a strong advocate for researching, goat health and hygiene, all demonstrated on her farm. Because of her dedication to these issues, she rarely has a problem with herd diseases that many other goat farmers have, and she amazingly manages her farm full time as well as a medical career. ~Story by Judi Craddock in progress.

On November 22, 2019, the NRCS Starkville Field Office led this on-site farm tour showing conservation practices in pasturelands that have been placed on the MSU South Farm under a 319 Grant from EPA/MS DEQ. Presentations were given to show the "before" conservation practices were installed, and then a farm tour of the "after" conservation practices were installed. Results were documented, indicating the USDA/NRCS conservation practices and support guidance from the Oktibbeha County NRCS Service Center staff. **Shown here are landowners, NRCS, MSU Extension Service, and DEQ officials at the Catalpa Creek Farm location.**



Outreach in Hinds County with JPS Students

On February 4, 2020, Hinds County Supervisory District Conservationist Brad Mitchell made three field visits with students from the Career Development Center/Jackson Public Schools. Mitchell, Shannon McCarty, Mark Scott, and Eugene Livingston showed them a 410 structure, explained the use of grade stabilization structures, and discussed tree planting and proper tree check out for practice certification. They also demonstrated a pasture with a CRP buffer along a creek and showed a shallow water crossing area.

NRCS employees introduced the students to some new things that might lead them to a career in agriculture.

A Model Cattle Farm Operation—Southern Cross Family Farms, Choctaw County



Drs. Gary and Nancy Jackson

Folks from Area 2 recently visited Southern Cross Farms near Ackerman in Choctaw County. Dr. Gary Jackson who is Director of MSU Extension Service; and his wife Dr. Nancy Jackson who is a practicing veterinarian for large animals, gave us an interview and tour of their 706-acre beef cattle producing farm. The Jacksons were named ***National Cattleman's Beef Association—2020 Region 2 Environmental Stewardship Award*** winners. NRCS in Choctaw County, under the leadership of District Conservationist J'Nay Domineck, has been instrumental in providing technical and program assistance through EQIP and CSP that has aided them in becoming the winner of this prestigious award. *(Story by Judi Craddock in progress.)*



Use of watering facility conservation practice (water trough).



Fence conservation practice.

“Helping People, Help The Land”

Area 3

Adams, Amite, Covington, Forrest, Franklin, George, Hancock, Harrison, Jackson, Jefferson, Jefferson Davis, Jones, Lamar, Lawrence, Lincoln, Marion, Pearl River, Perry, Pike, Stone, Walthall, Wayne, Wilkinson



Dennis Jones
Area Conservationist

As the saying goes, “when life gives you lemons, make lemonade.” That’s exactly what we did in Area 3 in 2020. This year we endured COVID, new planning/ranking programs, changes in work schedules, multiple tornadoes, multiple hurricanes, etc., but the employees of Area 3 performed at a high level as usual. We were able to obligate over \$11 Million through the CSP and EQIP programs. We also had over \$12 million approved for the Emergency Watershed Protection Program (EWP). I tip my hat and say thank you to the employees of Area 3 for providing exceptional service to our customers in 2020.”



Agriculture Partners Unveil First Wetland Pollinator Garden in Mississippi

Deep in Biloxi, Mississippi heart, agricultural partners have been working diligently to establish a first of its own in Mississippi—a wetland pollinator garden. This vision became a reality as USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA-NRCS), Mississippi Urban Forest Council (MUFC), and the Harrison County Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD), joined forces to bring the wetland pollinator garden to Hiller Park Friday, July 10th.

Being funded under the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), this 1,400 square-foot garden is the first of its kind that will be creating a sustainable pollinator site in urban and rural communities across Mississippi. By restoring this site to more natural conditions by planting wet-loving trees, shrubs, and herbaceous plants, the benefits include:

- ◆ the reduction of landscape maintenance (mowing) that was complicated by the wet conditions,
- ◆ support for a wide range of pollinators, as sources of nectar from flowers, as host plants for caterpillars, and as nesting sites for pollinators, and
- ◆ enhanced treatment of runoff from the splash pad and adjacent upland areas, thereby improving water quality to the nearby water body (i.e., Biloxi Back Bay).

As Donna Yowell, the executive director for MUFC, explained it, “This unique garden will also process and clean stormwater runoff from the children’s water pad in the park, something that has never been done in the state!”

Clarence Finley, Assistant State Conservationist for Programs, believes this is the shining star project within NRCS and is excited to see its growth and how it will impact Biloxi for years to come.

“We see a lack of pollinators in America which are essential to farming and reproduction uses of our natural environment. So, this project will support the core environment of them in this community,” said Finley. “People will also get a chance to enjoy this beautiful park while enjoying and also learning about the different wildlife that will be attracted to this pollinator habitat.”

Yowell is thankful for the partnership with NRCS and knows what it means to have such a great agency on a project like this.

“Working with NRCS has been very beneficial for our community projects,” said Yowell. “The group provides a lot of resources to different communities, non- profits, and farmers across the state, so we are very appreciative of the partnership we have formed.”

Area 4

Bolivar, Coahoma, Holmes, Humphreys, Issaquena, Leflore, Quitman, Sharkey, Sunflower, Tallahatchie, Tunica, Warren, Washington, Yazoo

"First, I want to express my thanks to all the Area IV Employees for putting up some remarkable accomplishments even during a pandemic. 2020 was challenging, but NRCS employees, District employees, ACES employees, and contract workers all pulled together to ensure that our customers still received the assistance they know they can receive from the Mississippi NRCS team."



Kevin Kennedy
Area Conservationist

Our Area 4 Field Offices in FY20 obligated over \$7.4 million on 56,000 acres in the CSP program. Over 3.2 million of these CSP funds were contracted with our Social Disadvantaged and Beginning Farmers. In the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the Delta obligated \$21.4 million on 76,000 acres to help landowners conserve their lands.

This year we had several disasters that hit our state hard. \$1.1 million of our obligated EQIP funds went to assist our landowners in correcting environmental issues caused by the disasters. Also, \$3 million of our EQIP dollars helped farmers utilize surface water for irrigation instead of groundwater.

While the Area 4 Engineering staff were busy assisting Field Offices with designs and surveys, they also put up some remarkable numbers in helping our local communities with the Emergency Watershed Protection Program (EWPP) after several major storm events. The Engineering section, led by Supervisory

Engineer Paul Rodrigue, completed 25 agreements for \$6,328,651. They also have 91 agreements under contract for \$21,714,882 that will be completed in 2021.

(Pictures below)

It would be impossible to list all our accomplishments that our area and field offices do daily; what is not impossible is to recognize how these things get done. Area IV has an Area Office Staff that are at the top in their field. We have a field staff lead by six highly trained Supervisory DC's and a field office staff that words cannot explain what they mean to their communities and landowners in their counties. We also have one of the best State Office teams that have provided excellent support to the area. As the Delta Area Conservationist, I have been blessed to supervise such a professional group of 4 employees who love their jobs and their profession. Thanks to each of you for another successful year.



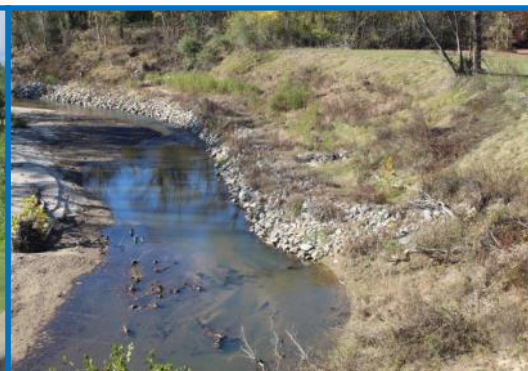
Fighting Bayou installed to capture irrigation runoff from several farms and reuse water for irrigating crops



Tillatobia Creek before.



Tillatobia Creek after.



Tillatobia Creek one year later.

My NRCS Family,

I knew this day would come but never thought it would come this soon, but time marches on for sure. On January 2, 2021, I stepped down as the Area Conservationist in the Delta. In my 37 years as an NRCS employee, I wouldn't change one thing. Employment with this agency has been one of the best things that my Heavenly Father has blessed me with. It amazes me that if you look around at all the agency employees, we all have a shared love and a need to save one of the greatest things our God created, this beautiful earth. I cannot stress enough how much I appreciate each of you for the career path you have chosen.

Over the years, I have listened to employees as they retire talk about this agency not being what they signed up for and that the agency was headed for a big crash. But look at us now, Mississippi NRCS is bigger and stronger than ever. Mississippi NRCS is blessed with the smartest and brightest employees that we have ever had in our history. I encourage each of you to continue with your can-do attitude and support for this agency.

Mississippi NRCS employees have put up numbers in the past couple of years that cannot be matched by any state. This is something that is not unnoticed and is acknowledged by our State Conservationist. We are blessed to have such a leader in our State! As States were losing employees and funding, Mississippi found a way to grow. I challenge each of you to continue to grow and excel in your positions and continue to make Mississippi NRCS one of the best places to work in our Government today. Our Soil and Water District partnerships are the envy of all other states. Thank you so much to all the District Clerks that have put so much into our great partnership.

I will not disappear from the agency; I will still be around doing what I love most. If you ever need assistance or need someone to talk to concerning your career path, please don't hesitate to call me. Beverly Wright in the Greenwood Area office will have my contact information.

Thanks for each of you,

Kevin Kennedy



Area 4 Conservationist Kevin Kennedy and family.

Farewell!

Mississippi Agriculture Overview

Agriculture is Mississippi's number one industry, employing approximately 17.4% of the state's workforce either directly or indirectly. Agriculture in Mississippi is a 7.35 billion-dollar industry. There are approximately 34,700 farms in the state covering 10.4 million acres. The average size farm is composed of 300 acres. Agriculture makes a significant contribution to all 82 counties. In celebration of the efforts of those who work so hard to feed and clothe us, we present this overview of Mississippi's top 16 agricultural crops.

1. Poultry / Eggs – \$2.16 Billion

- Approximately 763 million broilers were produced in 2020.
- 1,237 broiler farms.
- 1,392 million eggs produced in 2020.
- 234 farms with 100+ layers.

2. Soybeans – \$1.21 Billion

- 111,240,000 bushels produced in 2020.
- 3,087 farms.

3. Soybeans – \$1.13 Billion

- 19,700,000 acres in 2020.
- 125,000 forest landowners.

4. Cotton – \$491 Million

- 1,310,000 bales produced in 2020.
- 780 farms.

5. Corn – \$387 Million

- 88,690,000 bushels produced in 2020.
- 1,427 farms.

6. Cattle/Calves – \$261 Million

- 920,000 head in 2020.
- 15,980 farms.

7. Catfish – \$172 Million

- 35,100 acres of production in 2020.
- 205 operations.

8. Hay – \$140 Million

- 1.40 million tons produced in 2020.
- 610,000 acres harvested.

9. Rice – \$138 Million

- 12,580,000 hundredweight rice produced in 2020.
- 221 farms.

10. Horticultural Crops – \$106 Million

Horticulture crops include vegetables, melons, potatoes, fruits, tree nuts, berries, nursery, greenhouses, floriculture, sod and Christmas trees.

11. Sweet Potatoes – \$97 Million

- 4.87 million hundredweight produced in 2020.
- 27,500 acres harvested.
- 172 farms.

12. Hogs – \$38 Million

- 190,000 hogs and pigs.
- 1,002,000 piglets born in 2020.
- 437 farms.

13. Milk – \$24 Million

- 8,500 milk cows in 2020.
- 65 Grade A dairy herds.

14. Peanuts – \$18.9 Million

- 99 million pounds produced in 2020.
- 22,000 acres harvested.
- 113 farms.

15. Wheat – \$4.2 Million

- 860,000 bushels produced in 2020.
- 20,000 acres harvested.
- 162 farms.

Mississippi Value of Production Estimates, December 2020.

Source: Mississippi State University, Division of Agriculture, Forestry and Veterinary Medicine; Mississippi Farm Bureau Federation

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